

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Daniel Skelton: The Story of a 1930s-educated African American Veterinarian

Editor's Note: *Many African American veterinarians who graduated during the early and middle years of the 20th century worked in the federal meat inspection service. This included many of the approximately 70 men who graduated from Northern colleges before Tuskegee established a veterinary program in 1945, and also many of the Tuskegee graduates of the 1950s and 1960s. Their legacy in helping assure a safe supply of food for the American public in addition to the military is an important aspect of African American veterinary history.*

The following story represents part of the legacy. Dr. Daniel Skelton spent his entire career in the food inspection service of the federal government. At the time of his death in 2011, he was the last surviving African American veterinarian to have been educated during the Great Depression.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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Daniel Skelton was born near Brunswick, Tennessee on September 10, 1912. When his father deserted the family, eight-year-old Dan moved in with his school teacher aunt, and she encouraged him to get an education. He heeded her advice and received his undergraduate degree, majoring in chemistry and biology, at LeMoyne College in Memphis.¹

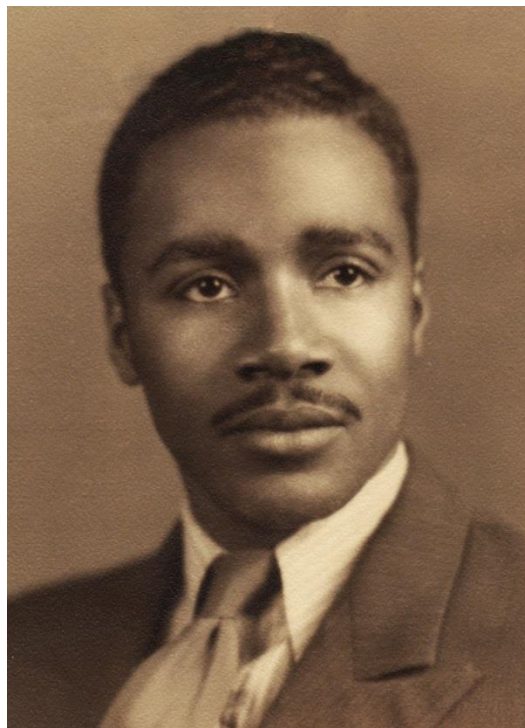
As with many students in the early years of the Depression, Dan worked his way through college. He had the good fortune to live and work as waiter and chauffeur in the residence of the Irish Bostonian and Harvard-educated President Frank Sweeny. His wife was deeply involved in local animal welfare issues and Dan helped in her activities with the Memphis Human Society.

Noting his interest in medicine and animals, Sweeney encouraged young Skelton to become a veterinarian rather than a physician which had been his interest. With no veterinary colleges available to him in the segregated south, the president suggested he move to New York to establish residency and then apply to Cornell.

Skelton took Sweeny's advice and in his words here is what transpired:

*"I graduated in Memphis on a Tuesday evening in 1934, then Mrs. Sweeney took me directly to the train station that night, and I was washing dishes in Brooklyn 48 hours later. I wrote to Cornell's veterinary college, but was rejected. I applied two more times, but to no avail. Discouraged, I called President Sweeney. 'Don't do anything,' he told me, 'I will look after it.' Within a week, I was accepted."*²

Dan was a well-respected student among the members of the Class of 1939. Described as quiet by classmates, he was well liked: *"a nice person,"* one classmate reminisced. *"We kidded him and he kidded us. He was fun to be around. He was an average student and worked hard."*³



*Graduation Photo of Dr. Daniel Skelton.
Cornell Class of 1939.
(Photo ©Cornell University)*

Dan recalled some rough times balancing work and studies,

"I was working all of the time in the first year and had little time to study. Because my grades were suffering, President Sweeney sent me some money so I didn't have to work quite as much. I made it through the first year, but then

nearly busted out of pathology in my second year, getting grades of 55 on the lab part of the exam and 57 on the lecture part of the course.

“Desperate, I got out my motorcycle—it was winter, zero outside—and took it for a ride. I came back shivering. My friends gave me some aspirin and sent me to the hospital and I took my books with me. The doctor didn’t take me seriously but nonetheless let me stay in the hospital until Saturday. All this time I was cramming for pathology. The professor let me take the exam a second time and I got 95 on the lecture part and 95 on the lab part and they let me stay.”⁴

Dan had greater academic success in the remaining two years of veterinary school. He was married in 1937 and graduated on schedule in 1939. He was accepted into graduate school at Cornell but he couldn’t accept the offer, *“because the government required that I do meat inspection.”* He joined the federal food inspection service at a \$2,000 annual salary.⁵ He would have preferred to work in a big city *“where bigotry wouldn’t have been as pronounced,”* but was assigned to a meat packing plant in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

“It was a small town, mostly white, and I was the town’s first Black veterinarian. The people referred to me as a ‘fly in cream.’ I decided not to make any waves or try to walk on water. For example, I didn’t snitch when the men deliberately missed tuberculosis lesions in the slaughter house.

“After 18 months, I was promoted to supervisor over the objection of some of my colleagues. One of the workers in another part of the plant said to his buddy who was assigned to me, making sure I heard his comment, ‘How do you like a nigger supervising you? What is the world coming to?’”⁶

To his great relief, Dr. Skelton was transferred to Wichita, Kansas, in 1942. Though still a segregated community, he and his wife were much happier living in the larger city and they remained there for the rest of his career. He eventually became circuit supervisor, responsible for food safety at 22 packing houses and supervising veterinary inspectors throughout central Kansas.⁷

Dr. Skelton was an avid golfer and combined the travel associated with his work, both in Kansas and in attendance at national meetings, with the pleasure of playing at courses throughout the country. He was one of the people who helped integrate city-owned golf courses in Wichita and was still playing in his early 90s.^{viii}

He and his wife, Elnora, had two children. One of his grandchildren, Debi Thomas, achieved distinction as a world class figure skater, winning the US and world championships in 1986

while a freshman student at Stanford. She was named Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Year that year. She won a second national title and an Olympic medal in 1988, the first Black to win an Olympic medal in the winter games. She then went to medical school and is now an orthopedic surgeon.^{ix}

Dr. Skelton remarried following Elnora's death in 1998 and continued to lead an active life for several years. He died at the age of 98, during Black History Month, on February 5, 2011.

¹ LeMoyne College, an Historic Black College in Memphis, TN. It joined with Owen College in 1968 and became LeMoyne-Owen College.

² Skelton, Daniel, DVM, Cornell 1939 (retired United States Department of Agriculture veterinarian, Wichita KS). Telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2008 Jan 7. Dr. Skelton is deceased (2011).

³ Pontick, Albert, DVM, Cornell 1939 (classmate of Dr. Skelton and retired small animal practitioner in Hampton Bays, NY at the time of the interview). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) in Hampton Bays, NY. 2008 April 2. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12794> Dr. Pontick is deceased (2012).

⁴ Skelton, Daniel, *Ibid*.

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture Bureau of Animal Industry (as it was called then).

⁶ Skelton, Daniel, *Ibid*.

⁷ Dr. Skelton retired from the US Department of Agriculture in 1990 at the age of 78.

^{viii} Wichita Eagle, 2011 April 28, www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=69595841

^{ix} http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/debi-thomas-olympic-skater-and-surgeon

KEYWORDS:

Daniel Skelton
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Frank Sweeny

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.